HOST: I know none of you came to hear about me, but I have to tell you that seven years ago, I worked my very first literary event as an intern at a warehouse in Sodo, and it was to celebrate Ocean Vuong's poetry collection, *Night Sky With Exit Wounds.* That evening stole my heart. It was that night that burned the line "Loneliness is still time spent with the world" into my mind forever. Ocean is one of the rare literary luminaries who doesn't just shine, he illuminates the space between writer and reader with a fiery hot glow. Three books later, Ocean is blazing light back into our world with Emperor of Gladness, an instant NYT bestseller and Oprah's bookclub pick.
The Novel confronts the reader with choices: Will he jump? Will she come home or to the lack thereof? Questions of how American systems keep people buried in death, how addiction can rob you of decision, and above all, the myth that you must make these choices on your own. The characters we meet in the town of East Gladness become a family at the restaurant and in the boxing room, in the slaughterhouse and on the bridge. The specters have lost wars and grief is threaded through every relationship and page. With a poet's hand and a novelist's instinct, Ocean has forever changed the literary landscape, with his books that are, as he says, reincarnations of each other. Because the questions Ocean asks are so rich, you could spend lifetimes with each. He asks, and I'm paraphrasing, what is kindness without hope? How do you love this life? This brutal, heartbreaking, stagnating life? How do you give your loved ones your best self?
One of the things I remember most about my first event with Ocean, all those years ago, was having air felt in the room. And how when hundreds of people, hundreds of readers, bring their focus and energy into this space amidst the chaos of our world, something changes. Some small piece of our soft, simple lives. Please join me in welcoming Ocean Vuong and Thahn Tan.

[AUDIENCE CHEERS]

THANH: Hi, Ocean.

OCEAN: Hello.

THANH: Um, I think we're gonna begin today by hearing your voice. We all love hearing your voice, and we love hearing you read. So before we begin, is there a particular passage of the book that you'd like to share and read with us?

OCEAN: Yeah, yeah. Beautiful. Well, thank you so much, everyone, for being here. It's always a deep pleasure to be back in Seattle and wearing a Sonics T-shirt.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Perhaps just as important- it's a Finn Baker T-shirt. He was a Hartford native…so we loaned him to you. He did pretty good, huh?

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

So it's a special, special presence in my heart, and the confluence is equally cosmic, because I also have the pleasure of having my dear friends from high school, who now live in Seattle- Gabriel, Kelly and

Keith here tonight. This is probably the highest concentration of East Hartford natives in any place in Seattle, so I'm proud to have that happen tonight as well. And I'm grateful to them because they read the book and they kept me true to who I am and to my roots and I'm deeply grateful that our friendship remains steadfast after over 20 years. Thank you guys.

I'll read this little section... So, this book takes place in 2009, mostly because I am a slow thinker. It takes me 16 years to figure everything out.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

A lot of this book is haunted by what is now known as the Opioid Epidemic but in Connecticut, we were hit first with it, before it had a term. Purdue Pharma and the Sackler family were based in Stanford, Connecticut, and when it hit our communities, you know… I was catching up with my high school friends before the event, and it's just kind of this really sad ritual that we always ask who's died since we last saw each other. And it just became so normal that I forgot that it's full of loss, that perhaps not all generations are like this. But it hit us similarly to the Bubonic Plague- It hit us before we knew what was happening. So it was quite a heavy time to come of age, and this book is haunted by that experience.

[OCEAN BEGINS READING FROM EOG]

"The first person Hai saw OD was somebody's dad.

He was 12 and had gone over to this girl, Jennifer Knoxley's house to do a project for history class. They were in the living room, cutting construction paper and her father came in very quietly, like a ghost who was wheeling in, and he sat down on the couch. After a while, his head tilted back and his mouth hung open, eyes rolled into their sockets. He looked like somebody had pressed pause at the peak of him laughing at the greatest joke he'd ever heard. This was the image imprinted on Hai's mind when he signed in at the New Hope Recovery Center.

Every generation says this of itself, but these will indeed bewildered times. A time before Iphones were everywhere, and people still looked up as they walked. Their heads filled with self generated thoughts, floating up from deep pits in the subconscious. A time when people still knocked on each other's doors, and if you wanted to talk to somebody, you had to call them on a land line, listen to their mothers breathing for a while. Maybe the sound of her fixing a drink, or shaving her legs, then meet up somewhere. One of you waiting about, shifting your feet and looking at clouds or trees or municipal architecture, cars passing. Your dopamine levels higher for not having been depleted from blue-light screens throughout the day. A time when the drug dealer on the corner would, out of boredom, start balancing on the chainlink fence, the boy in him unable to help it, pants sagging for the effort, revealing his plaid boxers you can spot for the back window of your school bus. But then slowly, one or two or seven of your friends will find the pills, and they will flood their young brains with artificial joy, and you will join them running through the woods by the power plant, laughing at the immense night, your head levitating a full foot over your shoulders. And their eventual deaths will not yet be used by politicians to gain traction with the base. It did not have a name, the slaughter, and yet your loved ones were being slowly erased, even teachers, and lunch ladies overdosing overnight then cremated without ceremony. Their faces soon existing only in your mind. *Those were the times* those who lived through it would say, years later, not knowing what it was they meant..

Though it was never his drug of choice, he was barely 16 the first time he did heroin. One summer night at a skate park on the outskirts of town, he sat huddled among three other skater kids in the valley of a half pipe. The candle flamed still, the humid air as the spoon sizzled over it, Fugazi's “Waiting Room” running on a loop in a stereo in someone's JanSport. The boys had removed their socks, turning their long, bony feet in the light, searching for a good vein. They preferred their feet because it was easier to hide the stars. Plus, they could feel the speed of the hot acidic rush, literally surging through their legs to the tip of their heads. Some of them tracing their drugs ascent with their fingers as if pointing to ruined cities on a map. But the sensation for Hai was more like drowning in his own blood. His neck craning to get above the tide. Soon there was laughter everywhere in the dark. Hands slapping bare skin. But a half hour later, the only sound left was Fugazi, playing over their gleaming shirtless chests, mouths gasping like shored fish as fireflies flitting over them in the greenish night.

Rehab, if nothing else, was a place to store yourself for a while. It was also, he quickly learned, a kingdom of boredom. All the cliches about it are true. You wait around until whatever poison that's ruining you empties into the world as time. Then you fill that emptiness with more time, talking, walking around the record room, talking some more, painting watercolors, those zoo animals, reading YA or science fiction, the only genres allowed. And after all that waiting that you stand by the barred windows and watch their golden arches from McDonald's across the parking lot light up, which means it's time for the nurses to switch shifts for the night, and an alcoholic with Down syndrome named Jordan is next to you, pointing out the window, shouting, "It’s chicken tender time! It's chicken tender time. Hey, guys, it's tender time."

The rooms are named after various genus of squash grown in New England, a laminated drawing of each type pasted on the doors. Hai shared the “Kabocha” room with a sex addict named Marlin, who was strapped to the bed post with bungee cords to keep him from jerking off. He turned to Hai one night and said, quizzically, "Hey, man. I was wondering. How come I never see any Asians in rehab? I've been to, like, five of these joints and never seen one till now.”

“MSG,” Hai said, feeling crazy.

“What?” Marlin's eyes widened in the blue-wet dark.

“It absorbs all the poison. Why do you think the government hates the stuff? They don't want you knowing the truth. Then all these places will be out of business. They make a big fuss about how it's bad for you. Any time the feds say something’s bad for you, eat as much as it is as you can.”

“Holy shit,” Marlin said, sitting up.

“It won't work for your stuff, though.”

“Yeah, no, no, I get that, I get that. And what about you? You couldn’t absorb all your MSG or something?”

“I was adopted. Ate mostly waffles my whole life and now I'm fucked.”

“Damn dude.” Marlin lay silent the whole night. This new knowledge burrowing through him, hia straps clicking against the bedposts as he tossed about.

[AUDIENCE CLAPS]

THANH: Thank you for that reading.

OCEAN: Thank you.

THANH: Oh, I love it. I love reading the dialogue and these voices and these characters, and I just did voices in my head the entire time that I was reading this. And my first question for you is: How much of Hai is *you?* Is actually *you*?

OCEAN: Well, some of it. I think he's, you know, my character's a lot better than me. They get twelve drafts, after all. I get one draft in life, and often mess it up.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

But, you know I wrote about this today on Instagram- my first novel was a private document performing as a novel between Little Dog and his mother. It was important for me to start my debut with two Vietnamese people talking to each other, because I felt like if non-Vietnamese readers were reading my debut novel, I wanted them to eavesdrop. I wasn't ready to speak directly to non-Vietnamese folks. And this book is perhaps Little Dog's debut. If he was going to write a novel, what would he write? What part of his life would he hide? Which part of it will he focus on? How would he frame his life?
I'm interested in self-mythology and in that sense, I'm interested in auto-fiction, but not in the narrow frame that American literary critics often position auto fiction as something that comes out of the Early Aughts, relatively new, naval gazing- often performed by white writers, exploring upper-middle class, suburban life, all of which, I believe, are legitimate topics, but the frame is so narrow. That's one of the problems with American literary criticism… it often establishes white frameworks and then shoves people color inside it and judges them on those terms. But for me, the first model for me was my elders.
As you know, growing up in Vietnamese households, I was raised by Women in Harford, Connecticut, and, you know, it was almost like a Russian novel in that there were four women who gave birth to six sons. All my aunts and my mother gave birth to sons, and so you had women coming from a patriarchal country in its own way, it's a different flavor, but it's just as patriarchal as this one. And then they're in a new patriarchal society, that they're raising boys who were acquiring English at a faster rate than they were, which meant that they were losing the sort of center, even though they were, indeed, and still are, a matriarch. And so, having so little power in the world, when it came time to come home, they told their own stories about themselves and what they'd been through, as a kind of capital to build traction and the stories would change with each telling and I realized that they were self-mythologizing. And when they did that, it was always like they were opening black holes that we were gathered around them and they had us, all these boys, eating out of their hands. Knowing when to pause, when to stop, when to use exposition, when to slow down the scene. In retrospect, I did not understand. I thought, "Gosh, I had a master class in storytelling." But the stakes were not to publish or to get in a magazine. The stakes were tremendously high in that they were trying to redignify their history in front of their sons, in a world that was degrading their positions as women. And so when I looked at that in terms of auto-fiction, that's always in my first model.
And so when I think about how much of myself is in this, I'm not so interested in mapping that out because I'm disinterested in making an autopsy of my work. But I am interested in casting simulations through auto-fiction because auto-fiction's central power is that it is interwoven and entangled with history. The history and the politics that I have lived through as a person are exactly the ones mapped onto my characters. And to me, that's actually really exciting, because I get to launch them into the same paradoxes and aftermaths and I myself have lived. And it's not to knock folks who don't do that, you know, but to me, If i were to take these conditions and write something Science Fiction or Fantastical, I

would lose the historic interest. And so my models for autobiographical work are my elders, but also non white practitioners of storytelling in this country.
If you go back to the autobiographical work of Harriet Jacobs an enslaved woman, or Frederick Douglas, right, you imagine that the same criticisms of auto-fiction, naval gazing, or self absorption would not hold water when applying that gaze to people who are literally enslaved and had to articulate with the English sentence and be their own testimonies of crimes against their freedom and body.
You see this through the Blues tradition- one of the great tropes of Blues music is the tracking of travel. "I've been to New Orleans, I got the blues" "I went up to hot springs, Arkansas, and I got the blues." Those were not songs of tourism, they were testimonies during a time of Jim Crowe, and Sundownt owns. They were a catalog of black survival. And every time they were uttered, they were testimonies of actual surviving through space, through the American space. Then from there, that tradition goes right up to hip hop, right, where self augmentism or selfpathologizing, taking the self into your own hands, at a time where the media is saying your body is nefarious, criminal, under-human, lower class, what have you. It was to regain power, Having been brought up in black and brown communities of immigrants, Dominican, Haitian, Jamaicans, in Harvard, Connecticut, who came to this country, or rather, were allowed to come to this country because of the lack of the labor force during World War II, to work up the tobacco farms in Connecticut, I saw very early an entirely different frame for auto-fictive work and the sort of hyper-literary position came much later. So I'm always interested in the proximity of authorial history and character history and how those interact.

THANH: Ocean, how do you know so much?!

OCEAN: [Smiles, and shifts in his seat]

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

OCEAN: Well, I'm glad you think so. I have this mental illness where I speak in paragraphs. I think it's delightful for my students, it's horrendous for my family.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

But I know I don't know a lot. But I think, to me, it's a good question you're asking as a Vietnamese American, because I guess I was the oldest in my family, and the first of my family to read. Dyslexia also runs tangent to this whole, you know, geopolitical fracture. And so it's kind of a double whammy on my kin and I happen to be the only one that kind of got out not exactly unscathed, but I saw that the lack of capacity to enter this culture linguistically erased them. And as a child I watched them again and again be defaced. Their is humanity literally not seen. My mother was at times white passing. She's half white, but as soon as she opened her mouth, her accent outed her. So folks would speak English to her as she would respond with this kind of horrified realization, akin to a Munch painting…a Munch scream, and that became the symbol of her outsiderhood. And I learned right away that "I have to know as much as I can as fast as I can" if I was going to make my elders visible in this country. My English was this magic spell that rendered them visible. This was very clear when my mother was in the hospital. Towards the end of her life, with stage four cancer, they would come and treat her like a sack, putting needles in, without telling her what it is. And when I was there all of a sudden, well, I knew how this worked by now. So I

said, “Hello, I'm Ocean Vuong, a professor from UMASS Amherst, this is my mother. Can I ask what's the protocol?”
And then the program reshuffles- you can feel an ambush- *subordinate clauses have entered the room*. It shouldn't be this way, but I've lived here long enough to know that is the way. Standard English has power. And although standard English is no more legitimate than AAVE, spanglish, regional creole, it's not even more legitimate than broken English. But it is the English attached to an army, a navy, and a court system- so it has authority. And often, in these spaces, I think of James Baldwin, when in his dialogue, confronted with the question to use standard English or AAVE in his writing, and he’d take them both in one hand, or Zora Neal Hurston’s another example, using vernacular as a kind of resistance. Both, or equally legitimate modes. Baldwin, of course, when asked about this, famously said “I need to speak in a way that those who are trying to kill me understand me”. And it's between those two poles, you open up the possibility of all linguistic strategies for literature. On that note, I would continue to say that if you're working in opposition of power as a writer, if you're opposed to power or critiquing power, or working to re-identify yourself or your communities in the face of annihilation or eration, that we all are working in the Grand River created by Black thought in this country. That's not an opinion. It is a fact.

[AUDIENCE CLAPS]

You know, before Dickinson and Whitman, who I owe so much to, I suppose, there was for Phillis Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon. Jupiter Hammon, a Hartford native and Wheatley a Massachusetts native, where I live now, both of whom were writing poems as enslaved people. Wheatley herself, it was forced upon her that seven men had to screen her work before it went to press. So to me, that, too, is an American tradition. We owe it to ourselves, we owe it to our students, to point the cannon back that far and hold those bodies forward, because they have made *me* possible. I am legible to this culture because of Carlos Belowan, Maxine H Kingson, Tony Morrison, Baldwin, Lanston Huges- and so we're all working in that great river. You can put many labels on me, whatever you want, queer, Asian, American and working class, what have you, but there's never been a question that I've asked myself whether it's diaspora, authenticity, language, communal work, linguistic expressions, metaphor, imagery.. There’s not a question that I have asked that a black writer, on a global scale, has not already asked in a robust way. It doesn't mean that the answers are there, and it doesn't mean also that we are asking on the same lane, but the field of that work is already there, and I owe so much to that.
I often tell my students, how lucky are we to come this late to the archive? You know, because when they come to my class, they are often full of shame because they’ve already decided to be a poet, and they have to go through so much shame and resistance of that shaming, articulating their self worth even to their families, often, without achieving. By the time they get to my class, they're so broken down, but I think it's important to redignify the work, and I think that is what I'm really interested in. And if we open the archive, we realize that we are tremendously wealthy because we came late. Even though people have told them again and again “What else is there to say? It's all been said before.” “What can you write after Shakespeare?” You know, they say this, and they say this without question, and I see my students coming through that fire that they have to step through, and I tell them, we get to have *all* of Tony Morrison's catalogue as we work. Tony Morrison had to write without Tony Morrison. How did she do it?

[AUDIENCE CLAPS]

Right? You know, Virginia Wolf, Dickinson, they had to do that without them. We get them. And I think it's every moment that is the present, is the most capacious moment to be a writer, and I'm so grateful to come this late in the archive. On my more pessimistic days, I don't think I would be here, I don't think I would be legible to the culture if I was writing in the '30s and ‘40s. I needed to be in the 21st century, and that is only because of the writers of color before me who made my work possible and legible to the culture.

[AUDIENCE CLAPS]

THANH: You came late to this, and before we were backstage I was talking to some of your high school friends and I asked, was he this brilliant in school?

OCEAN: [*Looking at audience and smiling*] Y’all telling on me now?

THANH: I think it's Kelly that said her husband and her went to high school with you, and that apparently you went to the guidance counselor and when they asked what you wanted to do, you said you wanted to become a buddhist monk. And the counselor said, “Maybe you should try to community college first”.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

OCEAN: Yeah, I was so foreign to education, you know, because there was nobody in my neighborhood where education freed them. You just didn't see it. So why? Why do it, you know? I remember going into his office and…this is how outside of it all I was: He had a banner that said “ASS CO” and I sat down and I said, "Why do you have Ass Company? Why do you have a banner that says, ‘Ass Company’ on your wall?” and He said, "That's Assumption College”.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

It was our icebreaker. I thought it was pretty cool. I was like, “Can I work at Ass Company?” And I guess, you know, I wanted to be a buddhist monk because I already, in all seriousness, had had enough. I'd seen enough of life at that point. My friends were dropping left and right to drugs or being in prison. And you know, I have a lot of survivor's guilt even now. I am no more smarter than they are, I am no more talented or passionate or steadfast, and they deserved a decent shot at this thing called life. And they were wiped out because a pharmaceutical company put profit ahead of their lives, and the pharmaceutical slaughter mimicked the slaughter of war from Vietnam. In other words, Monsanto's invention of Agent Orange and now its role in holding our fruit supply hostage. There is a through line there. And so I think growing up, I saw that corporate profit was destroying my childhood. I think of Ginsburg's famous line, “I saw the best minds of our generation destroyed by madness”, and I will replace madness with fentanyl and heroin. And so I was a part of that as well.
A lot of my friends from tonight and back home I met at the skate park. I was a skater kid, and you know, and not to toot my own horn but I was pretty good.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

But uh.. there's no evidence out there. I could go down the halfpipe, up the halfpipe, 50/50.. *[points to the audience]* I got witnesses. But another thing that I saw at this skate park, was that there's a moment where, particularly around American boyhood, which is something that I'm interested in, when the skateboard breaks, there's almost this unspoken understanding that you have to complete the break. And when that happens you can hear it, and everybody kind of stops, and they turn to the person and they watch and it's a very somber ritual, but you watch some, you know, some skinny kid with no shirt on just finish destroying that break. And I watched and I realized that it's kind of a parable of what's actually happening to American boys' masculinity- which was that all of them, by the time they were 14 and 15, and I was one of them, were deeply, deeply frustrated. And they knew that there was a standard of masculinity, that try as they might, they could not uphold because this country demands masculinity to be performed in such a narrow attribute, a narrow standard- that to fit into it, you would have to amputate nearly everything of your humanity. I think what I realized was that it was already crushing them before they even realized what they could be or who they were. The problem was that as men and boys, they were also given absolute bodily agency. Right? That's what male privilege is- Agency. You can do whatever, as long as you fit into this mold, anything is at your disposal. So it's not a surprise to me that most of the mass shooters are men, right? Because of the idea that you're celebrated your whole life through destruction. "Go get 'em", "Crush em, killer", "Go in there, gun's blazing", right? It's the only time they're valued, when they're destroying something.

And here they are, right? Destroyed. Finished. That became a symbol and I think what I realized was that, you know, growing up, if you wanted to go put your arm around your male best friend, you had to have a magic spell. You had to say, "no homo", and it's the saddest thing. Forget about going to the moon, forget about having the greatest prophets in modern history or inventing the greatest medicine. We are not that advanced if we require an "abracadabra" for a boy to do the most basic human thing, which is to put his arm around his friend. I would say we are incredibly primitive if we need that. It was almost like too, if you failed to be a man, the masculine ideal, you were no longer human and it was so narrow, that none of them could fit into it. Not without a severe price. The research has now started to catch up, the psychological research that says that men that adhere to masculine ideals have the worst mental health outcomes. I'm deeply interested in that. I realize that for all of our talk about privilege, which is true, what I saw was moments of vulnerability and deep sadness and frustration that they never showed their mom and their dad. They never showed the girls that they were talking to. But I was this observer, and I was also attracted to them, so I'd have to see them closely in this sort of backstage of their life. And what I saw was a deep, deep frustration, and ultimately I realized that they were in a cage, and the only reason I was spared from that cage was my queerness. I knew I didn't have to live up to that. Even though I felt I misunderstood, I knew that my queerness rescued me. It gave me a reason to make a sharp turn, and I was in my own cage, but I did not have to go into that one. And I think that's why to me, it's really deeply important to think of all of these terms as symbiotic terms. They're not just male issues or women's issues or queer issues. They're symbiotic. We will not be safe until we have made way for them, men, to enter the capacious humanity without having to conform to the dogmatic restrictions. We have forged something in this country, through hundreds of years in this country, and we won't be safe until they can be freed into their humanity.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

THANH: I would love to see you in the conversation with, like, Theo Vaughn or Joe Rogan. Theo, Joe

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

OCEAN: I'd be into it.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

It's interesting you say that because I think there's a lot of conversation around cynicism, right? As a teacher, I wonder what's happened to our students? They're my diagnosis of this. It's my 11th year as a professor. I taught undergrad for a while and then I went to graduate, but I also visit high schools throughout the country. And I have never seen a generation more afraid of trying hard. Any one of them that tries too hard is "cringe". We have turned social media into a panopticon. It is now a surveillance state, where anyone who believes in, or goes all-in on something, or stands for something is "cringe". I visited this private school where students signed up for one on one sessions, and I was talking to this brilliant, brilliant, young woman, 15 years old, and she signed for poetry class. We went through the poems that were brilliant and after 20 minutes, I said, "What do you want to do? What do you want to be?" and she said, "Well, it would be really great to be a poet, but I don't really want to tell my friends this, 'cause it's kind of cringe". It broke my heart and I then said, "You're already all in. You're taking poetry class, you signed up here, you've written incredible poems. You're already trying. Why, why is it that you have to try secretly?". I think ultimately they're afraid of judgment, but it's not just them, it's a larger culture at large that comes out of advertising.

The advertising language and the onslaught, and this is a thing that I've just started to come up on so it's a bit underdeveloped, but I'm just thinking aloud with all of you because I think one of the problems of the advertising language is that it's dependent on tearing us down. Everywhere we look, we're told our bodies are not enough. We don't have the right clothes, we don't drive in the right car, we don't live in the right place, we don't have the right skin color, we don't have the right homes. You're constantly broken down. And then you go home and you turn out the news to be informed, because we all want to be informed as citizens, and you get a talking head- you get a Joe Rogan or a Tucker Carlson on one side. On the other side, you have the John Stewarts or the CNNs, or the SNL news segments, right? And the reason why both are culpable, in my opinion, is that they use humiliation as a rhetorical device. How that works, how this program works, is that it creates an inside joke between host and viewer. And it basically says, "You're smarter, right? You're smarter than that. All these idiots that we're showing you, you're not like them. All these idiots on the Right who don't know where states on their map are, those aren't you. You're not like them, right? You're smarter than that, you and I. You're uplifted." or "All these idiots on the left- the woke with the blue hair, they think they know what they want, but they don't know. You're not like them, are you? You're smarter than that." It's a hazing ritual that seductively amplifies the ego of the viewer. Sometimes, you even cut to commercial, and the commercial will go right back to telling you that you're not enough.

If you went and told your therapist "Hey, I'm living with this person who all day tells me I'm horrible, or I'm not enough. And then for about two hours a night, all of a sudden, that I'm the smartest person in the world. I'm not like anyone they've ever seen before. There's 50% of the entire country that is stupider than me." If you said that to your therapist, they would quickly tell you to get out. They'd tell you you need to get out of a psychologically abusive relationship. Americans have been for decades, in a linguistic

and abusive cycle, that benefits profit. The ad money for those for the talking heads, and the ad revenue for the products throughout the day, so we have been ping-ponged, right? And these are quintessential rituals of a narcissistic bully. I don't think it's the fault of Americans that cynicism tracks so powerfully in this culture, because cynicism has now been misread as intelligence. Those who are in the 1%, the elites who are running our country to the ground, they want us complacent. They want us to not go forward, they want us to be afraid of "cringe". They want us to just stay where we are on the line and not believe in anything, because then they can rob us, in one hand and sell us snake oil in the other, no matter what side of the line it is. It's interesting because if you look at the mode, it's often humiliation. If you humiliate somebody, the ideas stick.

The devastating thing was early on in my teaching career, I started to see this in my students. They would critique each other, and they would use humiliation to deliver the critique. And it wasn't bad enough that it happened, but it worked. "Oh this line is so sentimental, I can hear the tiny violins" and then everyone would nod and giggle, and I had to put an end to it. I said, "You will not use humiliation, as a cheap rhetorical device. You will back up your ideas with ideas." That is the standard.

[AUDIENCE CLAPS]

You owe it to your peers, but you owe it to yourself. You will not use the tool of abuse that has been used for profit to sell your ideas. You cannot sell your ideas. You have to back up your ideas and thoughts with more thought. And when I realized that, I started to see this linguistic abuse everywhere.

The most clarifying writer who brought this report was John Berger, in his seminal book *Ways of Seeing,* he talks about the gaze of the supermodel. He said, the supermodel's gaze is the supremacist gaze. It's the most powerful gaze in this country, because it never looks at you, the viewer, it looks beyond you. And it looks beyond you with indifference and ambivalence, as if it's jaded. It's disaffected. It can't bother, because it's seen it all. And in a culture where we are in an onslaught of linguistic seduction and coercion, where someone's always trying to get in our view or in our wallet to convince us of something, the most powerful thing is to be unconvinced. And the model basically says, "wear this $800 garment and you too can be so superior as to be unmoved".So cynicism becomes cool, it becomes chic, it becomes, "I've seen it all, and I'm bored".

I've noticed this trend, and I wonder if teachers in the audience have tracked this too, but early on in my career, my students were much more articulate, say, 10 years ago. But now they have been taken to mumbling more. And it's not because they can't, but it's almost like articulation is too winsome. The mumble is closer to being disaffected, and I have to work them out of it, but it's a fascinating anthropological sort of data set where it's almost like… speaking clearly is now trying too hard. And a try-hard is a kind of fool, right? Because there's nothing worse in this country than a fool who believes in something enough to try as hard as they can. Because that means you have gone all in. And if you've gone all in, you clearly haven't thought enough about it. The cynic's position is always much more superior because they get to judge those who go forward without trying themselves.

I am concerned that we will ultimately come to a place where we are too scared to innovate in the arts both in our private lives, and in public communities. But I am hopeful because once I established that rule in my class, when I said "You will not use humiliation, because it's easy and cheap. You will have to think here and we will help you. We will all help each other think." it was almost like something lifted. Suddenly everybody leans forward and it's that feeling of "Oh, we are now in the discourse." We are now truly in the classroom, which is what? Not a place where dominance and submission get replicated from

the culture, but a laboratory, a true laboratory, where ideas can be tested, and you can fail and get it wrong, and you will be given grace and permission to try again. When that is established, they quickly shed it all. It brought me to understand that Americans are actually not averse to sincerity in earnestness. They're embarrassed of it in the room, but they're deeply hungered, hungry for it. There's a deep hunger for, which is why, you know, at any given time, the Bible is the best selling book. It's one of the most sincere texts, whether you agree with it or not, it's hard to go against a sincere project of this kind of spiritual awakening. Similar to the perennial works of Dickinson, and J.D Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye,* or Virginia Wolf- very little irony or witticism, or any of those things. Humor, yes, but they're launching deeply sincere works. So I felt a kind of dichotomy- I think they were actually not averse to it, but were afraid to be judged when it's in the room. It's "cringe" when it's in the room. But like that brave, brave young student that I met. She's doing it backstage, but she's scared. The culture has made her scared to do it in front of people. But I think that's a wider symptom of what's happening at large.

THANH: I think what this brings to mind for me, too, is polarization. We are pulled to the extremes. And one of the beautiful things about this book is that you bring voice to, and you talk about the every day, about the mundane things that you wouldn't think would be part of an epic. When we think about the hero's journey, we think it's got to be something with high stakes or major things happening. And you make so clear that that's not… this book is not about that. There's not some clear transformation by the end of this. And there really is so much beauty in the everyday lives of Hai and the people around him. Thank you for taking that approach. I wonder if it was difficult? Was your editor, or other people like, "We need more happening here"?

OCEAN: Oh, thank you for that. I'm very lucky to have an incredible Editor named Ann Godoff. She's in her late 70s. She's seen everything. I'm so proud to work with someone so *[inaudible]*. She's edited Mary Oliver, Zadie Smith, Thomas Pynchon, Will Smith.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Like I said, she's seen it all. And what is really special about that is that there is nothing unprecedented to her, right? She always meets me where my ambitions are. And to me, as an Asian American, I know how rare that is, because our symbiotic function in this country historically, has always been in service of other things. We iron someone else's clothes, we do someone else's nails, we wipe someone else's grandmother's bum. We open the door for somebody else. Our prodigies are stereotypical, stereotypically playing Bach and Beethoven on the piano or the violin. Nothing against that, but that's often how we visually track in the arts. For an Asian American to come up with their own ideas, have their own philosophy, I know it's still very jarring to the culture. Whenever I work with people who understand, you know, she's a white woman, a queer white woman, but her whole life is about coming out of where she is and kneading the world. That's the work of an editor, is to edit culture, to work towards culture, legibility of all times. Her and I, there's a magic there, and we don't try to figure it out too much because you'll lose it. She just says "Ocean, I don't know why I get you. I don't know why you get me, but there are things beyond the cosmos that make things happen, that we should leave it at that."
Really, really I'm so lucky to have an editor who…. 'Cause my first book is a weird thing. I told her, "I do not want to tell a story. I want to write an artist statement that functions more like a Swiss army knife." I wanted to refuse creating this tour guide. I didn't want to say, "Get on the bus, I want to give you a tour

guide for Vietnamese American pain." So *On Earth* was deeply important in that it's a book that resists a passive reader. It just kept asking a lot out of the reader. To this day, someone who's smarter than I could probably tell you why that book was so successful. My dream was just to do my little weird thing, and then it kind of calcified into a niche thing and then I thought I'd go back to a weirder thing, called poetry. But I've always also felt that readers, particularly American readers, are much more capacious and smarter than critics in the industry allow for.

I did meet editors, when I was selling my first book, who were really concerned with questions like these. One editor did ask "What about the Midwestern reader?" I said, "What about them?" God forbid, they have nervous systems, interior lives, that they might even have gay sex. It was kind of these coastal assumptions that were eye opening to me that even being in this world of arts, which is supposed to complicate things, everything was so reductive, even including the conversation around the white gaze. I thought, what do we really mean when we say that, right? Let's really dismantle it. If we're going to dismantle the stereotypes around the lives of people of color, we also need to dismantle whiteness too. Its granular impacts, and not allow it to be the monolith that it is. Because what we're really talking about is elitist gatekeepers of institutions, and private schools, the upper middle class, the wealthy, the disdain, the racism, the white supremacy inherently, those things. Let's talk about that. But when we cast it all, it was never true to how I experienced it. The first white equals I saw in this country in Hartford were refugees from the Balkan wars, Serbians, Yugoslavians, Macedonians. They were fleeing the fall of the Soviet Union. Albanians, Armenians, who were fleeing genocide, come to America and were forced to check white in the census. And so the project of Whiteness in this country is a violent one in that all histories are vanquished into its order, and there are benefits to be in it. And this happened to the Irish too, right? Once upon a time the Irish were not white until they were, same with the Italians. And so I think the violent system of this monolith is up to the living to dismantle it, and to call out these systems as they are.

One of the things that I also experienced as a teacher is that I teach all my students equally, and a lot of my students throughout the 10 years that I've taught are white. And when we talk about "whiteness", they never possessed that- the sort of reductive, judgmental, exclusionist ways. All of them come to me and say, "Professor, I want to get it right. I want to use my sentences and elucidate a more ethical way, and I'm not seeing it in the cannon". They come to me with this willingness. They've come to me, and they've done the work. And I tell them "I'm sorry that Foucault and Hemingway failed you in how to write a better body that is not your own. But you are asking a question that very few, if any, white writers before you have asked. And you *are* asking, so you have to now be the first, just like many writers of color had to be the first. You now have to be the first and it's terrifying, but it's exciting and you also have access to all the archives before you, to do it. Welcome.

We can use it as a keyword in meetings and slogans, but as an educator, the idea of this reductant "white gaze" doesn't exist in my classroom because my students are already deeply invested in dismantling it and working towards a more ethical and more capacious work. That's kind of the ground that I'm working on and it's important to use as many words as we can, to really hold all corners of identities accountable towards the work.

THANH: So we have Q & A, and there are 46 questions that have been submitted, so we'll try to reduce it down to just a few. Is it okay for go over a little bit today? Because I would be remiss if I didn't also just tell you that grief is a journey, and I'm so sorry about the loss of your mother. As I was reading this book, I could feel and sense loneliness and I also felt a lot of compassion for you because I don't know what it's like to not have my mother and my father in my life. You write so eloquently and beautifully about

Chosen Family, really, and the people that we surround ourselves with. And I just wanted to acknowledge that the loss of your mother, it must be an ongoing journey for you, but I believe she would be so proud of what you have done and what you mean to so many different groups of people- writers, poets, the public sphere, public intellectuals, to Vietnamese people, to Asian Americans, the queer community. So many people see themselves in you and in your story. And I want to know how you're able to carry that weight and still maintain your sense of self in who you are.

OCEAN: Thank you. Well, I think before anything, my central practices as a Buddhist, and Buddhism teaches us that all this is an illusion. The body is like a hotel room. You spend time in it and then you leave it behind. So I don't have any… I'm not precious about this *[gestures to himself]*, or legacy or, you know, ego or identity. I have good days and bad days with it, but I don't see myself as anything more than myself.
I know it sounds very corny, but my family helps with that too. They don't care about any of that.. Everything you said, they don't care.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

I mean that, I mean that. And here's the thing. It's like, why, why should they, right? Because the majority of what I work in exists in a kind of middle class culture, right? Even if you can afford a $30 hardback, you know, for someone like my mother or my aunt or my stepdad who works from 8 a.m to 8 p.m, when are you to read a book? When will you have the 8, 10, 12 hours to read a book? Just because the New York Review or the New York Times cares about what I do, why should I enforce that concern on them? They should be wherever they are, and I'm actually really relieved that I don't come home as *Ocean Vuong, McCarthur-Grant-Whatever*. I come home as just a nephew or a brother, and some writers can't have that. Some writers can't escape that, and their work bleeds into their whole life, and it becomes the elephant in the room. And I'm really, really blessed that, you know, although I now have a salary that can support nine Vietnamese refugees, I don't take on the upper middle class gaze. I understand it, but I don't take that value, that kind of judgment, that kind of disdain. You know, it's not enough, it's not like generational wealth where I can free them from their jobs.
My Aunt still works at Fedex, my brother works at Dicks Sporting Goods and my Stepdad worked for 25 years at this company called Standin, and he spent 25 years making a single thing: a screw. It's a special screw that went into gas pumps. And when that company closed about 10 years ago, he made another screw, because his only skill in the American market was for a Cult manufacturer. He made a screw that went into the Cult Magnum, which was also manufactured in Connecticut. And to me, that's a quintessential American Story- gas pumps and guns. And what I saw in his life, I saw as a kind of loss, and that was my own 1.5 generation judgment, which I regretted. Because when I thought, "Gosh, I'm never gonna be like that. I've got to do something else". He worked from 3 p.m to 12 a.m. I never saw him. He never saw his son, my half brother. I saw him on the weekends, and when I did, I saw just a tuft of hair poking out of his blanket in the room, catching up on all the sleep he would lose. But he did it for us. and if you asked him, "Did you live your American life? Would you flee a war-torn country in the late 70s and catch a boat with 300 people? And on this little motorboat, when you watched people bury at sea, watched, people relieve themselves or throw up- who knows what else he was seeing, did you live your American life on your terms?" Without batting an eye he would say "Yes".

Every day, he would hang his uniform in this relative sub-section-housing apartment. We couldn't even paint the walls because we didn't own it. They told us "You cannot paint. You do not own the walls". So we rarely hung anything up, rarely did we hang up a family photo. It was just the altar, the altar and the dead were the only things that would be allowed. Those were the exception…and his shirt with a thumb tack. He would point to that shirt as a sign of pride. He'd say, "I have a uniform and on the uniform on my right chest is my Vietnamese name with diacritics". When I look at that and you ask me, "Is it a burden?", I've never seen it as a burden.
I also don't see myself as a representative. No one should represent anybody. No one person should represent any group of people. We've never asked F. Scott Fitzgerald to represent White Men. So no one- *[gesturing towards Thanh]* you should not have to, and I should not have to represent Vietnamese people. I'm more interested in presence. Like that young Cambodian man who opened this event with his beautiful, beautiful reading. I want more of us on stage. I don't want to speak for anyone other than myself, but if my work makes room and makes our bodies legible so that we can speak, in the same way that Black writing and Black thought have made this more possible for so many people of color, across all ethnicities and histories in this country and widen the scope of possibility, then that is the work. It's not unprecedented work. It's the same work, but I'm not interested in representation. Representation is cheap. Corporations can easily find one person to take the photo of Canada again and again on the website. But it's harder to bring more opportunities forward so that we can all work on our own terms. That is what true, true progress looks like to me.

[AUDIENCE CLAPS]

THANH:. Thank you, Ocean. Alright, let's make a goal for ourselves. It's 8:57, and we've got 46 questions, and I've got several that I think would be great, but let's try to answer as many as we can in the time that we have left.

OCEAN: Let's do two.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

THANH: Okay, um, Tony Morrison spoke of a time when Poverty wasn't shameful. What helps you de-shame poverty and redefine what makes a life worthy of honor today?

OCEAN: Miss Morrison was right, and I think it's interesting. I read somewhere else that America's one of those places where there is no reverence for the poor. You're poor, it's your fault. And we've equated being poor with being a fool. And when I was little, we'd see kids make fun of people, and being poor was a kind of ontological failure. It wasn't systemic or economic failure, it was ontological. "You are poor, and therefore, you are nothing". And meanwhile, you know, other cultures have always had a position, particularly in folklore and the mythology- think of Tiresias from the Greek Classics, both blind, but also gentle, a beggar, clairvoyant. And so the position of those things, there's a kind of wisdom or power or insight that is afforded those who have very little. For whatever reason, in our culture, there's never been room for that. I wouldn't dare to say that I'm working to widen that again, I don't feel like I'm doing anything beyond writing books, you know, in which these things are important to me, but I've not presumptuous enough to believe that I'm doing anything beyond that for working for people.

But I think there is a lot of shame, you know, and I watched… I watched so many… Well, I don't have to narrate it, but, when you grow up like this, you realize that no matter what you say, it's hard when you can't feed your family. It's hard when you can't give them what they want for Christmas. It's hard not to think it's your fault. So to me, when I'm writing about these folks, I refuse to consider myself a marginalized writer. I am marginal in the census. *You and I* are marginal in the census. Our voting communities are small, we are a sliver of this population. That is categorically undeniable. But I mean when I'm writing, I am not writing about marginalized people because you have to ask: "Marginal to whom?" They're not marginal to me, they are the center. I'm literally filling the center of the page with them. And the reason why I wrote this book the way I did, which has no escape plot, is that I wanted to meet them where they are on their own terms.

It's interesting, in American literary publishing, there's often two products: there's the book, which has a barcode, it's a product. And then there's a second hidden product inside, which is the promise of resolution. And it works like all other products. You buy a washing machine, it promises to change your life. A car- change your life, right? And there's a lot of shame. Notice the language, too, of commercials, it goes back to commercials. You see a Febreeze commercial, or something… Now that I'm an adult, a taxpaying adult, who you know, has just been in a lot of houses, I'm like, "This commercial is taking place in a $3 million house. Do people who live in $3 million houses use Febreeze?" Or you know, you watch a sitcom, right? And it has nothing to do with wealth, but then you're like, "This is taking place in a $5 million home with an infinity pool", and it's normalizing, right? So there's shame of the unreachable, even in something as innocuous as a sitcom. Also, you know, even a show like Succession is really strategically seductive. Why overthrow the rich when we can pity them from our couches? There's this tantalizing spectacle that actually humanizes all these things, so the visual opulence that we're often inundated with renders us a shame because we are never there.

In the same way, I think, I'm also interested not in happiness or joy in this book, but okayness. Fulfillment and contentment. I think we have allowed happiness to have a tyrannical function in our culture. Some of the most painful things as a teacher, I see sometimes, you know… my students' parents will come, and it's really interesting talking to the parents of a poet. They kind of bewildered.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

You know, every year at graduation they kind of come to me and say "Can you please explain why she did this?" The conversations go all kinds of places but sometimes at the end of it, a parent sheepishly says "Well, whatever it is, I just want her to be happy." And I think it's one of the most painful things you can say to your child. Or even to each other. Happiness is *so* hard. Our species has written hundreds and thousands, maybe millions of books. None of them have been a clear procedural towards happiness. You have better chances of writing a manual for bathing cats.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

But happiness… we have commercialized it, we have weaponized it, we've moved the goal post of happiness. "One more class. Sign up for my class. One more session of yoga. One more retreat, almost there. One more self help book, almost there." Every day, we made happiness a kind of unreachable utopia for which to profit from. And I think what I'm interested in here, is the kind of "Poetics of Loserdom", which is aligned with an "Okayness". Most of American life as I've witnessed it, and I'm no

expert, is very stagnant. But it doesn't mean that it's doomed. People like my step dad, my family, work in the same jobs, drive the same cars. That doesn't mean that they failed. I'm interested in stagnation as a place to work, and I don't want my books to be sites of structural freedom. I want to work inside that stagnation, because then people get to be totally themselves and they're not fodder for plot systems.
And where else does that exist? The sonnet.
One of the most innovative forms and anglophonic poetry is the sonnet. 14 lines, Volta of the 10th or 12th. That's a kind of cage, and yet within that cage, we have some of the most innovative lyric expressions from Petrarchan, to Shakespeare, to Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, Ben Lerner, so many folks, and I thought "That's it". That's what I wanted. The fast food restaurant is a sonnet. The shift at work is a sonnet. It's a closed container of internal innovation. I know we've been trained to want, to hunger for the escape plot. It's very cathartic. It's fantastical. But I wanted to write a book that borrows poetry strategies to do something closer to American life as I saw it, which is that to be trapped and stuck is actually a dignified attempt and trying your best. Without "cringe". Because most history books are filled with the exceptions. It's the people who overthrow the government, who broke the CEO, who escaped the systems, launched the war, saved the day. Most history books are filled with those people. But most of history is filled with people who are stuck- people who are stuck in the coal mines, stuck in marriages they can't get out of, or never wanted to be in. Some were forced into wars they never wanted to fight in or stuck in communities they couldn't get out of. Maybe they didn't want to get out. My first novel, the central question from myself was that I wanted to write a book where Queerness was not rescued by a city. I kept reading books again and again, where a structural shift from rurality to the city suddenly solved the vexations of queerness. Meanwhile, the queer people I know couldn't afford to go to the city. They had to take care of elders who were ill. They perhaps preferred to be in the country. Are they just doomed? Are their lives not meaningful or substantial enough to be written about? And so I guess I'm interested in reframing traditional ideas of "Loserdom" into innovative sites of dignity as expressed and evidenced by the sonnet.

[AUDIENCE CLAPS]

THANH: One more question, and I would love to hear your thoughts on this too: Quote, "Loneliness is still time spent with the world" Ocean, how do we keep ourselves from slipping under?

OCEAN: Oh, that's a big one. Well, I don't pretend to know, and I don't know. I'm in this boat as much as anyone else. I guess there's a reason why I started this book with a suicide attempt. Often someone stepping away from the ledge is traditionally at the end of a book. I started with it because suicide is very personal to me. I lost two friends in high school to it. I lost my uncle in 2012 to it. He was 28, I was 24. We went through the refugee camps together. In all senses, we were brothers. My first memory of America was eating sour belts out of a paper bag on a curb in Hartford, Connecticut with my uncle. In fact, that's the first memory of my life. I don't have a memory beyond that- when I was in the refugee camps. So my first memory in my life is a memory of America, and it was probably the last candy store where they had those big glass jars, and you picked what you wanted and they weighed it and put it in paper bags…So he was really dear to me.
He left a note, and there's parts in that that I'll never say, but I'll paraphrase one part that I think is at least useful to mention. He said his reason was that he was just tired of it. We often believe that there should be a grand reason, either to live or not to live. We're trained to see the justification as huge, big and dramatic.

And he just said "*[Speaking Tiếng Việt]*" he said that to his big sister, this was to my mother. "I'm tired of it."... I think that this ambivalence is actually very common. The ambivalence of living can also be very common. And so I was very skeptical of the grand narrative, and particularly how it's coerced with commerce as well.

We often tell our kids and our students "Go find yourself" "Go find your voice", as if it's something you have to go to . Go find yourself? That is the greatest paradox, right? Like, what do you mean? I'm here! I have to go out there, to find what's here? But without thinking, we say, "Go possess and grab", rather than develop. Develop the voice you already have. Develop the person you already are. Work on that. It's already there. It's just a work of clearing.

In Buddhism, we have this metaphor that knowledge is not acquisition, the metaphor is cleaning a dusty mirror. And if you try all your life to clear and learn and share your vision, to be capacious to people and compassionate to people, that whole life working, you might just get a tiny corner of that mirror. But I love that metaphor because it believes that all knowledge is already self possessed, and learning is just clearing the vision that's already in you, rather than grabbing and acquiring and getting a degree. I'm skeptical of external justifications, really. And so in this book, it's not a spoiler to say that the boy comes to the bridge, he contemplates suicide, and there's an 82 year old woman who is losing her laundry to the river and he sees her lose her sheets. Then, out of this knee jerk muscle memory, he shouts to her. He says, "Hey, your sheets!" and ultimately, he lives because he forgets to die. Because the stuff of life has brought him back. And I think sometimes I think that's it, it's that simple, and it should be enough to simply be in Time. The book is purposely designed into Four Seasons. It's broken into Four Seasons. We are pulled forward by time, and he realizes that he doesn't have a better reason to live other than that he is more useful to this woman than he ever was to himself. And I think for me, it's that obligation to community.

I wanted to ask that question because when you ask someone to step off the ledge and god willing they do, what they step into, is a corner. All the vexations and problems they have that all led to that ledge are still not solved. My favorite theorist, Terry Eagleton, reminds us that the act of suicide at its core is still an act of hope. One does it with the hope of alleviating immense pain. So when you step away from the ledge, you are stepping away from your last act of hope, I would call it a hopelessly hopeful act. And into complete emptiness. And yet that ignites me as a fictive question: What happens on day two for that person? Day three, day four, day twenty? When we hear the story of the person off the ledge of the news, everyone claps when they're led off the ledge. But I wonder if they're really clapping for that person, or they're clapping because society- normal, good, functioning society, has been restored. And so to me, it's, again, a kind of fruitful Loserdom because it confronts hopelessness while still honoring the decision to continue to live. And to me, you don't have to have the grand narrative, the shiny beacon, the divine answer. Sometimes it's what you owe to each other, that keeps you here long enough to have a decent life, and that should be more than enough.

[AUDIENCE CLAPS]

[OCEAN AND THANH JOIN EACH OTHER AND BOW TOGETHER]

[AUDIENCE CLAPS]